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ABSTRACT

The work of E. Boyer (1995) and his "Basic School" research were used as a model for building community on one southeastern Idaho junior high school. Boyer's research concludes that the most successful ingredient for a successful school is "connections," and that those connections are predicated on a school becoming a community for learning. Hispanic students in the school in question, who represented 33% of the school's 724 students, were experiencing a high number of suspensions and expulsions. An assessment by the school district superintendent and two researchers suggested that the main problem was a lack of school community in which all students were considered and included in the community. A faculty and staff survey was completed by 43 respondents, and a student survey was distributed to 167 students. Responses to staff and student surveys created pictures of the school that reflected a diversity of opinions about the school. Faculty and staff were surprised at the disparities between their views and those of students. They realized that although their awareness of themes and issues in the school had been raised, their work to create a learning community had just begun. Their final task was to develop a plan that would address the themes identified in the staff workshops that reviewed the surveys. These themes were: (1) school-community relationships; (2) building-wide communication and problem solving; and (3) the consistency of the administration when dealing with students and staff. The student and faculty surveys are attached. (Contains 17 references.) (SLD)

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Building Community in One Southeastern Idaho Jr. High School: A Case Study

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Paper presented at the Northern Rocky Mountain Educational Association Conference (NRMERA), October 1-4, 1997, Jackson, WY.

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Building Community in One Southeastern Idaho Junior High School:
A Case Study

Introduction

The word community evokes in each person a different sense and definition. For the purpose of this presentation, a community is defined as ". . .people with common interests living in a particular area; an interacting population of various kinds of individuals in a common location; a group of people with a common characteristic of interest living together within a larger society, a group linked by a common policy" (Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary, 1979). According to Follett (1918), "Community is the key-word for all relations. . ." (p. 66).

The need for children to have a sense of community in their learning environment seems critical in our modern day. We live in a world increasingly complex, interdependent, and changing (Alexander, 1997). Comer (as cited in O'Neil, 1997) informs us that the ties between families and schools needs to be strengthened because of the changes in our society. Gibbs (1995) states that "children's learning and development are influenced by the key systems of their lives - family, school, friends, and community." Sergiovanni (1994) underscores the importance of relationships in schools and the need for trust among teachers, parents, and administrators. He stresses the need for authentic community, a tie binding students and teachers through shared values and ideals.

Schools as communities are schools as multipurpose organizations. This means that schools become the focal point of people living together with common purpose in a common place (Alexander, 1997). Maintaining a school's cultural pattern is concerned with protecting and nurturing school and community traditions and cultural norms.

The sense of community in our society, according to Comer (1997), has ". . .broken down. In the past we tended to overlook the importance of community. Community provided social and emotional support for children, but we did not see how this related to academic learning. Today we are experiencing an unprecedented breakdown in our communities. Accordingly, we have a growing awareness of the importance of community. There is the simple need for people to feel and be connected in a world in which change, feelings of isolation and disconnectedness are accelerating at a rapid pace. Schenkat (1993) explains that

> There is not substitution for knowledge in seeking solutions. We need more complexity - more relationships, more resources of information, more angles, and more direction. . ." (p. 11).

People need to feel a sense of connectedness, to feel a part of and be included (Gibbs, 1995). Sergiovanni (1996) explains that the theories of leadership always refer to the connection piece and "connections satisfy the needs for coordination and commitment. . ." (p. 33). He suggests that moral connections stem from the duty of individuals toward each other and are grounded in culture. Maintaining the school's cultural pattern is concerned with protecting and nurturing school and community traditions and cultural norms (Alexander, 1997). Peck (1995) informs us that

> Unless we can quite rapidly learn how to better live and work together, there is every reason to believe that humanity will go down the tubes despite all of its sophistication about quasars and lasers, nebulae and black holes (p. 1).

According to Shaw (1992) teachers want a classroom and school where there is a strong sense of community. The sense of community provide the foundation for learning. "A learning community is where teachers, administrators, students, and parents all enjoy the mutual respect

and caring essential for growth and learning" (Gibbs, 1995, p. 23). She adds that

> A community provides opportunities for participation, involves youth in community service, provides supportive social networks, leaders prioritize community health, safety, and quality of life for families; and provides access to resources" (p. 45).

A learning community is a group of individuals who form a partnership based upon the concern for the welfare of self and others and for the "common good" (Alexander, 1997). He further adds that citizens acknowledge their interconnectedness, have a sense of commonality and purpose, and respect their differences. The public work of the learning community's individuals is:

- to support each other's growth and learning.
- to share in group decision-making.
- to share responsibilities for the action of the group.
- to celebrate individual and collaborative achievements.

"Community is the tie that binds students and teachers together in special ways, to something more significant than themselves: shared values and ideals" (Sergiovanni, 1994, p. xiii). Shaw (1992) highlights that "the issues of inclusion are resolved when individual students feel they are part of a team and class" (p. 1,3). He adds that "community is reached when the issues of inclusion, influence, and openness are successfully dealt with" (p. 1, 5).

It has been over a decade and a half since the National Commission on Excellence in Education (1993) published A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform. This reform report and others provoked and generated national fear that American education was declining and American economic preeminence in the world was in similar decline (p. 5). Since

the publication of this report, educational theorists and reformers have reached an incontrovertible conclusion. The world has changed and schools must change too.

The place to begin a comprehensive approach to school renewal is in the local school. Accordingly, the researchers turned to the work of Earnest Boyer (1995) and his "Basic School" research as a model for building community in one Southeastern Idaho Jr. High School. Boyer's research concludes that the most essential ingredient of a successful school are "connections" and those connection are predicated upon a school becoming a community for learning in which every child will become a confident and resourceful learner. Boyer (1995) informs us that a school becomes a community for learning when it is:

- a purposeful place,
- a communicative place,
- a just place,
- a disciplined place,
- a caring place, and
- a celebrative place (p. 18).

Boyer's six descriptors of a community for learning became the basis of the survey questions administered to the faculty, staff, and students.

Statement of the Problem

Hispanic Students in One Southeastern Idaho Junior High School were experiencing a high number of suspensions and expulsions. The school's total student population approximates 724 students. Sixty-six percent of the students are Caucasian, 33 percent are Hispanic, and 1 percent are other. The suspensions and expulsions of the Hispanic Students represent a figure of

approximately 30 percent to 40 percent of the students in the school. An initial assessment by the new district superintendent, school visitations by the two researchers and interviews with community members and staff indicated that the main problem was a lack of school community in which all students were considered and included in the community.

Research Methods

The discussion of methodology considers first, as the main dimensions or focus of the study, a sample of students, administrators, certified, and non-certified staff in one Southeastern Idaho Jr. High School. Second, it describes the research design.

The researchers visited the school site a total of four times. The first three occasions were for the researchers to immerse themselves in the school culture and to become familiar with the school, it's employees, to administer surveys to the students, staff, and certified, employees, and to complete any in depth-interviews.

Data collection for this study can be regarded as a blend of quantitative and qualitative approaches. The initial design of the study called for the use of two surveys. Both surveys were researcher generated based on the Boyer Basic School model. Both surveys were translated into Spanish. The faculty and staff survey was distributed to 22/41 certified personnel; 5/5 administrators; 9/9 food service and custodial personnel; and 7/7 classified personnel for a total of 43/84 or 51 percent. The student survey was distributed to 167/724 students in grades 7-9. The faculty and staff survey was based on a variation of the Likert scale with two added open-ended questions. A 4-point Likert scale was used to encourage respondents to distinguish between "agree" and "disagree" thus avoiding a neutral response. The student surveys consisted of all open-ended questions. The open-ended questions were designed to identify any serendipitous

findings not identified under the quantitative portion of the study.

Miles and Huberman (1994) describe qualitative data as usually in the form of words rather than numbers. Qualitative data are a source of well-grounded, rich descriptions and explanations of processes in identifiable local context. Qualitative data are more likely to lead to serendipitous findings and a new integration. Qualitative data take the researchers beyond the initial concepts and generate or revise conceptual frameworks (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

To explore the disciplinary manifestations reported by the superintendent and facilitate the movement of the school toward becoming a learning community, an inquiry-based approached seemed most appropriate. Patton (1990) suggests that, ". . .a design needs to remain sufficiently open and flexible to permit exploration of whatever the phenomenon under study offer for inquiry" (p. 196). There is no better source to provide insight into the fears, concerns, or anxieties of a particular setting than the people in the setting. Louis (1982) commented that:

> A holistic understanding of human social structures and behaviors requires a qualitative, observational based study of individual cases rather than experimental manipulation of selected variables (p. 7).

Accordingly, the design of this study was selected because studying social structures and behaviors cannot be done outside the context of the environment in which the structures and behaviors take place (Alexander, 1991, p. 47). This understanding provided the impetus for the additional days of visitation.

Findings

Responses to the staff and student surveys created a picture of the school that reflected a diversity of opinion about the school and the issues it faced. The survey questions were based upon the themes of justice, democracy, trust, honesty, fairness, student involvement in problem

solving, staff collegiality, and values. Again, these themes were build upon Boyer's descriptors of a community for learning.

After site visitations, interviews, and administration of the surveys, a one day workshop was held with the school faculty and staff. The two researchers facilitated the workshop. The focus of the workshop was for the school faculty, staff, and administration to identified emergent descriptors, themes, and patterns from the data and then, design a process that would move them forward toward creating a learning community as previously defined.

Each method of data collection and interpretation has its limitations and strengths. Workshop participants analyzed the survey results in random groups. Major themes and patterns were identified by the workshop participants and presented (Patton, 1982). This process makes it possible to avoid missing unanticipated outcomes, helps to eliminate perceptual bias and maintain objectivity and independence throughout the process.

During the workshop, the researchers modeled behaviors that demonstrated community building by creating an atmosphere of justice, democracy, trust, honesty, fairness, collegiality, and values. Participants were involved in problem solving and team building activities that were grounded in the modeled behaviors and identified descriptors and themes. The staff survey responses were as follows:

Staff Survey: 43 Respondents

Question	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1.	9	18	16	
2.	2	22	19	
3.	5	18	18	2

4.	5	11	26	
5.	17	16	8	2
6.	6	24	11	1
7.	6	26	10	
8.	10	23	7	2
9.	1	17	20	3

1. _____ Jr. High is a just and democratic community.
2. There is a high level of trust between students and staff at _____ Jr. High.
3. The norm at _____ Jr. High is that everyone is honest.
4. Fairness pervades all relationships at _____ Jr. High.
5. The leadership at _____ Jr. High support a healthy moral environment.
6. Students at _____ are involved in taking an active part in solving their own problems.
7. As part of a school wide character development strategy at _____ Jr. High, students help govern the life of their school.
8. Staff collegiality flourishes at _____ Jr. High School.
9. The community supports teaching values as an educational priority at _____ Jr. High.

Survey results and the staff identified emergent themes underscored the apparent conflict that precipitated the superintendent's concerns about race based suspensions and expulsions and the invitation of the researchers into the junior high school.

The image of the junior high school that emerged for the work of the faculty and staff was then compared with the characteristics of an effective learning community as identified by the

Boyer (1995) research. This comparison provided the faculty and staff with a place to begin designing their own effective learning community.

Discussion

Elias, Bruene-Butler, Blum, and Schuylert (1997) inform us that "Successful schools have started with a small pilot project. . ." (p. 19). The researcher's visitation and subsequent workshop were intended to be a pilot project to provide the administration, faculty, and staff with data that would enable them to launch into designing a learning community that was more purposeful, communicative, just, disciplined, caring, and celebrative and that was based upon the themes of justice, democracy, trust, honesty, fairness, student involvement, staff collegiality, and values.

Responses to the staff and student surveys created a picture of the school that reflected a diversity of opinion about the school. Faculty and staff were incredulous at the disparate views of the school that emerged from the surveys. They identified that there were some areas of strength in the school, but that there were other areas within the school community in definite need of improvement.

Staff Survey Responses

1. 37 percent did not agree that the jr. high was a just and democratic community.
2. 44 percent did not agree that there was a high level of trust between the students and staff at the junior high.
3. 46.5 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed that everyone at the jr. high was honest.
4. 60 percent disagreed that fairness pervades all relationships.
5. 23 percent disagreed that the leadership supported a healthy moral environment.

6. 21.9 percent disagreed that students were involved in taking an active part in solving their own problems.

7. 23 percent disagreed that students helped govern the life of their school.

8. 20.9 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed that staff collegiality flourished.

9. 53 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed that the community supports the the teaching values as an educational priority at the jr. high.

The faculty and staff realized that the survey responses and the percentage of suspensions and expulsions were symptomatic of larger issues. These larger issues centered around justice, honesty, fairness, a democratic community, and school-community relationships. These issues reflect five of the characteristics that Boyer (1995) indicates are requisite for a school to become a community for learning.

Three major themes emerged from the staff open-ended questions and were identified in the workshop by the participants. Those themes were (1) school-community relationships, (2) building-wide communication and problem solving, and (3) administration's consistency when dealing with both students and staff. When asked, "If you were the principal at _____ Jr. High School, what would you do differently?" Comments were made such as:

"The administration must continue to work with all aspects of the community."

"'Consistency!' Not just the principal, but all administration involved.

"I would support All staff equally. Janitors and cooks are just as smart, aware, and important as teachers (Just because we are in these positions doesn't mean that we don't have degrees).

Major themes that emerged from the 7-9 grade student surveys included (1) administration's consistency when dealing with and disciplining students; (2) the attitudes and

behaviors of "some" teachers towards students; and (3) racial tensions. Comments made by students were as follows:

> "Make sure that all the rules applied to everyone, no matter the race or gender."
>
> "I think that the teachers don't really care about what we are trying to tell them and I feel really bad on how they treat us and Spanish people. It's like they're prejudiced."
>
> "That the teachers who are so angry all of the time would change."
>
> "Encourage teachers to have happier attitudes."

Conclusions and Recommendations

The workshop evaluation indicated that the researcher's visitations, the surveys, and the workshop, while they were initially greeted with wariness on the part of the administration and some of the teachers, were ultimately well received. One faculty member commented that what was most useful was "looking at where we are and where we need to go." Another stated that the research was an "incentive to try new ideas." A third faculty member indicated that what was most useful was "the chance to see the outcomes and thoughts of others and the opportunity for some of the themes that were discovered to be actually implemented."

Staff recognized that while their awareness to themes and issues in the school had been raised, their work to create a learning community that is purposeful, communicative, just, disciplined, caring, and celebrative had just begun. The final task for the staff of the junior high school was to develop a preliminary plan that would address the themes that had been identified during the workshop and bring these themes to action. Follow-up meetings and workshops for further community building will be scheduled.

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STUDENT SURVEY

Please respond to these questions honestly. **Do not write your name on this paper.** No one will know who provided the answers. We appreciate your help in this study to learn about your school. You do not need to worry about spelling, but please write your answers clearly.

1. How long have you been at _____ Jr. High School?

2. If you came from another Jr. High School, which school do you like best? Why?

3. What are some things about _____ Jr. High School that you <u>really</u> like?

4. What kinds of things about _____ Jr. High School do you wish were different?

5. If you were the principal at *this* Jr. High School, what would you do differently?

Write anything that is on your mind about the school that you would like for us to know.

We really appreciate your help in responding to these questions. Thank you.

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S T A F F S U R V E Y

Please respond honestly to the following statements. Circle the answer that best describes your feelings, at this time, at Jr. High school.

SA= strongly agree
A = agree
D = disagree
SD= strongly disagree

1. Jr. High is a just and democratic community. SA A D SD

2. There is a high level of trust between students and staff at Jr. High. SA A D SD

3. The norm at Jr. High is that everyone is honest, decent and caring SA A D SD

4. Fairness pervades all relationships at Jr. High SA A D SD

5. The leadership at Jr. High support a healthy moral environment. SA A D SD

6. Students at Jr. High are involved in taking an active part in solving their own problems. SA A D SD

7. As part of a schoolwide character development strategy at Jr. High, students help govern the life of their school. SA A D SD

8. Staff collegiality fluorishes at Jr. High school. SA A D SD

9. The community supports the teaching values as an educational priority at Jr. High SA A D SD

If you were the principal at Jr. High School, what would you do differently?

_____

_____

_____

Comments: Feel free to add any comments which you would like to make regarding Jr. High school. Thank you for taking time to answer these questions.

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